

Women's homelessness and experiences of gender-based violence in Waterloo Region

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***“Don’t tell them
you’re homeless”***

Experiences of gender-based
violence among women
experiencing homelessness
in Waterloo Region

Project Willow

Project Willow is a collective of organizations in Waterloo Region looking to create systemic change to respond to and prevent experiences of gender-based violence among women experiencing homelessness.



This project is rooted in and guided by the voices of those with living experience.

Funded By:



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Presentation Overview

This work was completed in Waterloo Region (Ontario), which is situated on the unceded land of the Haldimand Tract and is within the territory of the Neutral, Anishinaabe, and Haudenosaunee peoples.



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PART ONE

Research Design

METHODOLOGY & DEMOGRAPHICS



Our Process: Values



Flexibility

- Be ready!
- Meet folks where they at, when they are ready, in a way that works best for them



Harm Reduction

- Don't aim to bring up unnecessary trauma
- Commit to the goal of change
- Allow wandering and storytelling
- Build immediate non-consequential trust



Follow Through

- Being involved in creating means engaging in the creation

Methodology



Ethics

- TCP2S, informed consent, tiered response for any issues brought forth by participants, mediators outside the research team.



Mixed Methods Approach

- Survey & semi-structured interviews



Criteria for participation

- Women (cis, trans*, two-spirit, and non-binary) who were/have been homeless in the last three years and used emergency shelter services.

Methodology



Total of 61 participants

48 surveys & 13 interviews

Demographics



Had been
homeless for
over a year



Were
between the
ages of 25-54



Self-reported as
having mental
health concerns



Identified
as having a
disability

PART TWO

Research Findings

SAFETY & EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE



Frequency of Violence

72%

experience violence at
least twice weekly

44%

experience violence
daily

92%

experience violence
weekly

Types of Violence Experienced



Verbal

96%



Emotional

79%



Financial

63%



Physical

54%



Sexual

33%

Types of Violence Experienced

* Samples include only folks identifying with related social categories.



Racism

60%



Spiritual

27%



Homophobia

60%



Transphobia

100%

Q- Where is violence happening?

A- Anywhere and everywhere.

“There are no real safe places in the community”

— Survey participant

“I think I am so nervous everywhere because I have been humiliated so badly the last six months”

— Survey participant



“What’s gonna happen is gonna happen. You have no control over it. I can’t control if something’s gonna happen bad.”

Interview Participant

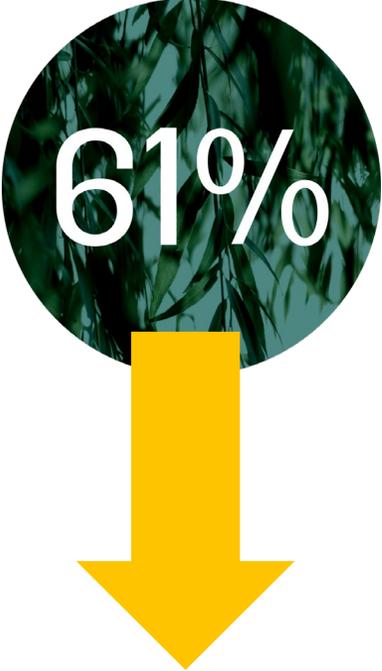
Layered Effect of Violence

The idea that for the majority of women experiencing homelessness in our community are experiencing violence **at least twice a week**, and that violence can come for a **variety of perpetrators**, in a **variety of different forms**, over a **variety of community settings**. This causes a state of constant vulnerability and trauma and is a key definer of women's homelessness in Waterloo Region.

**What is the fallout of
this experience for
women experiencing
homelessness and
regular violence?**



Women are in hiding



61%

used prevention and diversion services that actively and intentionally kept them housed in violent situations



83%

stayed in an abusive or violent housing situation because it felt safer there than being homeless or using the emergency shelter system

“Because before, when I come to speak or when I had to go homeless, none of the workers helped me. She actually put me right back into the situation that I told her I was getting away from. Every time I’ve asked for help, they’ve denied me, misguided me, led me in the wrong direction.”

-Interview Participant

“You do not know how much actual physical, emotional and financial trauma that each one of us have gone through before we’ve even been able to have the strength and the courage to walk through these doors...”

-Interview Participant

Masculinized spaces

Avoiding co-ed shelter



avoided the use of co-ed
emergency shelter
services out of safety
concerns

“The women’s shelter definitely feels safer than a place with co-ed services to me. I’ve found if you keep your head down and don’t start anything those that seem scary will leave you be.”

-Interview Participant

Masculinized spaces

Forgoing basic needs



have avoided accessing the services and support they need (ex. food, clothing, medical help, etc.) because they were concerned they would run into an abuser and/or experience violence

“I slept in the parking garage across the street because I wanted to make the statement that I do have nowhere to go. And I’m not going back to a building that I’ve been raped in.”

-Interview Participant

Masculinized spaces

Unsafe Substance Use



are using substances to cope with their experiences of violence and resulting trauma.



have avoided spaces that can be male-dominated (ex. soup kitchens, safe consumption sites, co-ed shelters, etc.) because they have felt uncomfortable or concerned for their safety.

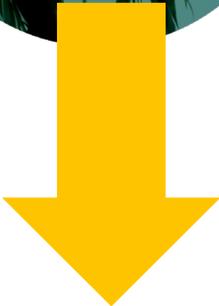
“Okay, I’ve seen situations where there’d be so many girls, and they all get together and fight. And yes, somebody that they know will be, say they start fighting right inside your room. And if you have any dope, then you give them dope to use and it keeps everybody mellow and fine. And then when it’s all gone and they start all over again. It’s just a play.”

-Interview Participant

Sense of justice is lost



experience violence at least once a week



have ever reported their experiences of violence to police

“The Police don’t treat you like the victim. Sometimes, they treat you like you did something wrong.”

-Interview Participant

“They didn’t show up. I waited for six hours.”

-Interview Participant

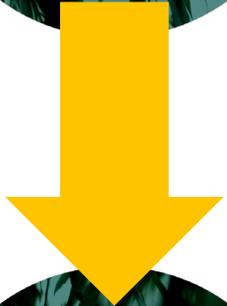
“He’s the father of my children. I don’t want him to be in jail. I just wanted it to stop.”

-Interview Participant

Violence for survival



have made connections with people who are known to be violent as a way to keep themselves safe



have used violence on others to keep themselves safe

“People were like, like she did that tonight? Oh, fear. Yeah. Always. Yeah, there’s a lot of people who didn’t want to focus on me after that because they thought like I could do some serious damage.”

-Interview Participant

"If I see any violence, I roll into a ball and cover my head. I fall to the ground, curl into a little ball and cover my head and pray."

"I will change the way I present myself in the means of my gender or ethics in order to blend in with an environment in which I believe is violent."

"Go to shelters, but make sure that you get a stable place to live. Because sometimes, the longer you are in the shelter, the worse you can become."

"Don't tell people you're homeless, it's like giving them permission to take advantage of you."

"Be friendly to everyone because then you're never somewhere you don't know anyone who can help you."

"You can't trust anyone, not even your friends."

"I try to stay safe and spend all my time trying to stay away from people."

"I have no advice, I'm still living in violence."



"Make sure you find somebody you can trust in the community. Don't stay on the street. Don't be alone when you're homeless."

"Don't trust me, you don't know even the ones you do can turn back on you."

"Ask for help sooner when people can still help you."

“Don’t tell people you’re homeless, it’s like giving them permission to take advantage of you.”

“I will change the way I present myself in the means of my gender or ethics in order to blend in with an environment in which I believe is violent.”

“Ask for help sooner when people can still help you.”

“Go to shelters, but make sure that you get a stable place to live. Because sometimes, the longer you are in the shelter, the worse you can become.”

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**What do we want
to change?**



Revisiting our approach to shelter & justice

Better models

Change in attitude

One stop justice

“They shouldn’t be all in one shelter. Families and mental health should really be concentrated on because there’s a lot of these they’re not doing anything to help their mental health. They’re just making it worse by getting they’re not doing anything to help it. They need to make sure that they get the proper help they need and they don’t, they just get in one shelter and mix all together in a room and it’s a very toxic environment and can break people because we have no choice but we have nowhere else to go.”

-Interview Participant

Addressing limitations of masculinized spaces

Absent women

Shift from co-ed

Safer access

“Like any time, yeah I [avoid it]. Mostly the soup kitchen any time I’m there, there’s an aggressive situation ...”

-Interview Participant

“You know, so I don’t want to do the regular people that go there. So just I guess from what I’ve observed, from my standpoint, men are more comfortable there. Women tend to be a little more cautious. You know, stuff like that.”

-Interview Participant

Tackle policy from a gendered analysis lens



- Housing priority lists
- How modernization can create more safety issues (ex. payphones)
- Private sector housing expectations
- Community/public spaces
- Justice options in the community
- Development



Gendered housing options



Want to see a continuum of gendered housing along the continuum of affordable, supportive and transitional.

BUILD MORE!!!! BUILD IT NOW!!!!



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“I think women need to know that it’s not okay to be abused in any means, and there’s no wrong reason to call if you’re being abused, you’re being abused, and you have every right to call and seek shelter and seek a safe place to be.”

-Interview Participant



ACCESS THE REPORT

